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RHETORICAL FIGURES IN UK AND DUTCH TV COMMERCIALS

THE OCCURRENCE OF SCHEMES AND TROPES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON AD LIKEABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

Rhetorical figures present an advertising message in an artfully divergent way (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996, 2003a). They are often subdivided into schemes (e.g., Have a break, have a KitKat') and tropes (e.g., 'Always travel light' [Camel lights cigarettes]) (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1996, 2003a; Van Enschot, 2006). The omnipresence of schemes and tropes in print advertising has been shown by Leigh (1994) and Phillips and McQuarrie (2002). Several studies using print advertising have shown that the use of rhetorical figures can enhance ad likeability (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1999, 2003b; Van Enschot, 2006). To our knowledge, the typology of schemes and tropes has never been put to the test with TV commercials (except for a qualitative study by Crompton and McAlea, 2000). Perhaps the syntax and editing conventions of cinematography require an adapted typology. However, the elegance and the simplicity of the scheme-trope distinction invites to an exploratory study, which tries to map consumer responses to the presence of different types of rhetorical figures. Our first research question is therefore: to what extent is it possible to apply the scheme-trope distinction to a sample of TV commercials? An underlying question is whether the UK and Dutch TV commercials differ in the occurrence of rhetorical figures. The second research question we address in this paper is: do the effects of rhetorical figures in TV commercials regarding ad likeability resemble the effects found in print advertising?

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

McQuarrie and Mick (1996, 2003a) propose the reuse of the classical distinction of rhetorical devices between simple and complex rhetorical figures. They come up with a text-interpretive based typology, in which they exploit the distinction between schemes and tropes. Schemes are relatively simple figures and involve a deviation from the ordinary pattern or arrangement, for example, excessive order or regularity (cf. alliteration or rhyme). 'Beanz meanz Heinz' is a well-known example. Tropes are relatively complex figures and involve a deviation from the ordinary and principal signification, when a text or image contains excessive irregularity. 'Put a Tiger in your Tank' [Esso] is an example of a trope. Schemes represent deviations that occur on the surface; tropes function at the level of meaning.

McQuarrie and Mick have shown convincingly that rhetorical figures can be found in the verbal and in the visual mode (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996, 1999). Figure 1 shows an example of a visual trope; the chewing gum contains vitamin C, which is expressed by the apple. Van Enschot, Hoeken and Van Mulken (2008) propose to enhance the analytical framework by adding verbopictorial rhetorical figures: these figures can be found in the combination of text and image, as has been acknowledged by other researchers (Forceville, 1996; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992).

FIGURE 1. Screenshot TV commercial Davitamon

The use of rhetorical figures has been shown to be fruitful, both to the consumer and the advertiser. Rhetorical figures involve more elaboration (Mothersbaugh, Huhmann and Franke, 2002), assure longer retention (Tom and Eves, 1999; Toncar and Munch, 2001; McQuarrie and Mick, 2003b), and are often found more likeable than non-rhetorical figures (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1999, 2003b; Toncar and Munch, 2001; Van Enschot, 2006). Rhetorical figures are assumed to yield pleasure of processing and, with that, a more positive attitude towards the ad (cf. Tanaka, 1992, p.95, based on Sperber and Wilson, 1995 [1986]). It can be pleasurable to experience the artful deviation or to "solve the puzzle" (cf. Berlyne, 1971, p.136). For the advertiser, there is the added benefit of being seen as creative and clever, which could have all kinds of positive effects, like a more positive brand image.

The effects of the relatively simple schemes can differ from the effects of the relatively complex tropes. Tropes are more difficult to understand than schemes. To be processed successfully, tropes demand a reinterpretation of the advertising message and knowledge of the receiver, whereas schemes and non-rhetorical figures are processed more or less automatically and do not need to be reinterpreted (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999, 2003a). Studies by Ketelaar and Van Gisbergen (2006) and Van Mulken, Van Enschot and Hoeken (2005) show that attitudes towards more complex ads are less favourable than towards less complex ads. People might not be motivated to put energy into processing cognitively challenging ads, given that attitudes towards advertising in general tend to be relatively negative (Van den Berg, Duijnisveld and Smit, 2004, p.9-11). Therefore, relatively simple ads with schemes or without rhetorical figures may be more likeable than ads with the relatively complex tropes.

On the basis of the literature, we can predict that TV commercials with rhetorical figures, schemes as well as tropes, will be better liked than commercials without rhetorical figures (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1999, 2003b; Van Enschot, 2006; Toncar and Munch, 2001). Commercial understandability is expected to mediate the effects of tropes on ad likeability. Tropes will be perceived as less easy to understand than non-rhetorical figures, whereas less understandable commercials may be liked less than more understandable commercials (cf. Ketelaar and Van Gisbergen, 2006; Van Mulken et al., 2005). Commercial length may play a mediating role with regard to the effects of schemes and tropes. The attitudes towards longer TV commercials have shown to be more positive than towards shorter TV commercials (Singh and Cole, 1993). For exploratory reasons, some other factors were also added to the model (see method section). We were particularly interested in possible differences in ad likeability between the UK and The Netherlands. (The set up of the study limited us to focusing on overall differences between these two countries instead of differences in the effectiveness of schemes and tropes.).

METHOD

A sample of 100 Dutch and 99 UK commercials was randomly selected from a large set of TV commercials, for which consumer response data had been gathered by the market research company MetrixLab. The sample included TV commercials from brands in the following sectors of industry: e.g., FMCG, Telecom, Finance, Electronics, Energy, and Automotive. The commercials had all been broadcasted in 2006 and 2007, on Dutch or British national TV.

A content analysis was performed based on the taxonomy discussed in the previous section. The variables in the content analysis were: visual scheme, visual trope, verbal scheme, verbal trope, verbopictorial scheme, and verbopictorial trope (codings per variable: 0 = not present, 1 = present). Whenever a TV commercial contained more than one rhetorical figure in one mode (which turned out to happen rather sporadically), the most salient one was coded. Each commercial was coded by the second author. In order

to establish interrater reliability, 25% of the sample was also coded by the third author. As can be expected with interpretive data, the average Cohen's Kappa scores were sometimes relatively low. After a first rating procedure, the Cohen's Kappa scores varied from 0.04 to 0.40 (i.e. from poor to fair agreement) for the Dutch TV commercials and from 0.17 to 0.82 for the UK TV commercials (i.e. from poor to very good agreement). In a second rating procedure, both raters were confronted with each other's interpretations, and were asked to rate to what extent they were able to agree with the other. For the Dutch TV commercials, this resulted in a Cohen's Kappa varying from 0.90 (for only one variable) to 1.00 (for the remaining variables) (i.e. very good agreement). The Cohen's Kappa scores for the UK TV commercials varied from 0.91 (for one variable) to 1.00 (for the remaining variables) (i.e. very good agreement). Further discrepancies were resolved in discussion.

The consumer response data had been collected in various online surveys amongst about 100 respondents. The respondents were randomly selected from MetrixLab's large multisource recruited internet panel. They were paid for their participation. The female-male division was approximately 50-50% and the age was above 16. In each survey, a commercial was placed in between other commercials, to mimic a natural setting as much as possible. Respondents had the possibility to zap through the commercials if they liked. The following consumer responses were registered: e.g., commercial likeability (like the ad), understandability (easy to understand), readiness to watch the commercial until the end (% of people watching until the end), average viewing time, discriminative power of commercial (commercial never or hardly seen before), spontaneous brand recall, message recall, brand interest and buying intention based on the commercial.

Combining the content analysis and the consumer response data (consisting of aggregated data per commercial), a linear regression model was estimated to predict ad likeability. The stepwise method was used. The regression model presented includes only those variables for which the regression coefficient differs significantly from zero ($p < .05$).

RESULTS

Results of the content analysis show that UK and Dutch TV commercials contain very similar amounts of rhetorical figures, as can be seen in Table 1. On average, 90% of the TV commercials contained at least one rhetorical figure. Visual rhetorical figures appeared most often, while verbopictorial rhetorical figures appeared least often. Far more tropes than schemes occurred in the TV commercials.

TABLE 1. Presence of rhetorical figures in TV commercials

Type of rhetorical figure	UK	NL
Visual rhetorical figures	71 (71.7%)	68 (68.0%)
Verbal rhetorical figures	42 (42.2%)	43 (43.0%)
Verbopictorial rhetorical figures	19 (19.2%)	12 (12.0%)
Schemes	39 (39.4%)	34 (34.0%)
Tropes	77 (77.8%)	73 (73.0%)
Rhetorical figures present (at least one)	91 (91.0%)	89 (89.0%)

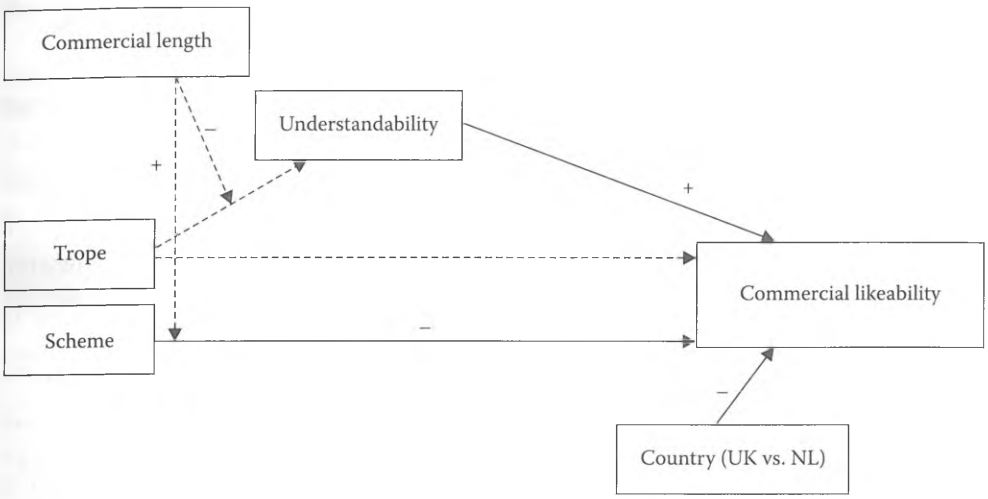

FIGURE 2. Main results regression model

The regression analysis (Figure 2) showed a direct but negative effect of schemes on commercial likeability. Tropes did not have a direct but, instead, an indirect positive effect on commercial likeability. Their effect was moderated by commercial length. The effects of shorter commercials were mediated by commercial understandability. As the commercial length *de*creased, commercials with tropes were perceived as easier to understand. Subsequently, understandability was positively associated with likeability. The effects of longer commercials were not mediated by commercial understandability. As commercial length *in*creased, commercials with tropes were better liked than commercials without rhetorical figures. The results also showed an overall difference between the UK and The Netherlands: commercials in The Netherlands are better liked than commercials in the United Kingdom. A complete overview of the significant factors, that were included in the regression model, can be found in Tables 2 and 3.

TABLE 2. Regression model commercial likeability

	B	β	Effect size r
Schemes	−5.43	−.15 **	.20
Tropes * Commercial length	.30	.28 ***	.26
Tropes * Discriminative power (never/hardly seen)	−.16	−.21 **	.06
Commercial understandability	.33	.27 ***	.36
Brand interest	1.07	.72 ***	.50
Country (UK versus NL)	−19.86	−.57 ***	.05
Readiness to watch	.50	.48 ***	.11
Buying intention	−.40	−.24 *	.38
Spontaneous brand recall	.17	.13 *	.25
Adjusted R^2	.50		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 3. Regression model commercial understandability

	B	β	Effect size r
Tropes * Commercial length	−.19	−.22 ***	.19
Message recall	.43	.39 ***	.49
Commercial likeability	.28	.34 ***	.36
Spontaneous brand recall	−.28	−.26 ***	.06
Buying intention	.28	.20 **	.39
Average viewing time	−.39	−.34 ***	.33
Adjusted R^2	.51		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The first research question was: to what extent is it possible to apply the McQuarrie and Mick framework to a sample of TV commercials? The McQuarrie and Mick framework (1996, 2003a), with an extension by Van Enschot (2006), was highly suitable for categorizing TV commercials. Schemes as well as tropes, in the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode, occurred in both the Dutch and the UK TV commercials. By far, most TV commercials contain one or more rhetorical figures. Visual rhetorical figures were present most often as compared to the other modes. Tropes occurred about twice as much as schemes, which is in line with previous research (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2002; Van Enschot, 2006; Van Mulken, 2003).

The second research question was: do the effects of rhetorical figures in TV commercials regarding ad likeability resemble the effects found in print advertising? We did find similar

results but we also found out that commercial length (which evidently does not play a role in print advertising) is a factor of importance. Understandability did not play a role for all commercials with tropes, as we expected (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1999, 2003a), but just for shorter commercials with tropes. As the length of a commercial increases, a commercial with a trope is liked better than a commercial without a rhetorical figure, regardless of the understandability. In longer commercials with tropes, people may receive enough information to easily understand the trope. The aesthetic pleasure of processing prevails. In shorter commercials with tropes, people may need to participate (infer) more than in longer commercials with tropes. The cognitive challenge remains, and with that the role of understandability.

Another unexpected result was that commercials with schemes were liked less, instead of more, than commercials without rhetorical figures. The explanation for this finding may be found in the fact that far more verbal than visual schemes were present in the commercials, whereas far more visual tropes than schemes occurred. In the current regression analysis, verbal, visual and verbopictorial rhetorical figures were combined, as the separate cells were not always large enough. A follow-up study is necessary in which the separate effects of verbal, visual, and verbopictorial rhetorical figures (schemes versus tropes) are investigated. One of the possibilities is to extend the content analysis of the MetrixLab database, which contains more than the currently investigated 199 commercials.

With regard to the general comparison between the UK and The Netherlands, ads turned out to be liked less in the UK than in The Netherlands. Rhetorical figures are equally often used in the UK and The Netherlands, excluding the option that the difference in likeability is caused by a difference in occurrence of rhetorical figures. It may be that UK consumers are far more overloaded by TV advertising than Dutch consumers, as advertising spending is much higher in the UK than in The Netherlands (Advertising Association, 2007; Nielsen Media Research, 2008). This advertising overload may cause their more negative attitude towards TV advertising.

To conclude, it can be said that the taxonomy of McQuarrie and Mick is very versatile in its use. Elements of TV commercials are easily categorized into schemes and tropes and into different modes. Furthermore, the occurrence of rhetorical figures does not differ a lot across Dutch and UK TV commercials. The regression analysis as presented here reveals just the tip of the iceberg of the insights that can be retrieved from this rich consumer response data set. Findings on, for example, retention of ads with rhetorical figures (e.g., Tom and Eves, 1999; Toncar and Munch, 2001) are still waiting to be discovered. Nevertheless, this study yields some interesting findings that extend the theory development on the effectiveness of rhetorical figures. It not only focused on TV advertising instead of print advertising but it also added the possibility that the assumed mediating role of understandability of tropes may not always be of importance.

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